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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000440

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SUNNI MUFTI SEES CRISIS OF IRANIAN,
SYRIAN MAKING

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Lebanon's highest Sunni spiritual leader sees the country passing through its worst crisis ever, and lays the blame on a regional Shia resurgence powered by Syria and Iran. The Lebanese issues of the tribunal and cabinet expansion are mere pretexts for Hizballah and Amal to cripple Lebanon's political system and divide its society. By creating chaos, the Shia parties and their Iranian backers are seeking to upend the Taif Agreement. Syria has different means of making trouble which include supporting Sunni extremists, mainly to give Damascus and Hizballah excuses to act against them. Russia is as much to blame for Lebanon's failure to enact the international tribunal as is Syria. Lebanon's next president should be a neutral figure who can nonetheless contain the opposition. With 70 percent popular support and a parliamentary majority, March 14 has the right to elect that president, but Lebanese are unused to thinking in terms of winning parties truly assuming the reins of government. Finally, the USG should undertake two initiatives to help solve Lebanon's problems: achieve the Israeli withdrawal from the Shebaa Farms and settle the chaos and violence in Iraq via a Taif-like agreement among the parties there. End Summary.

MOST EXTREME CRISIS IN LEBANESE HISTORY

2. (C) The Sunni spiritual leader in Lebanon, Grand Mufti of the Republic Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Qabbani, invited the Ambassador for a conversation at his Beirut apartment on March 24. Polchief and Poladvisor accompanied the Ambassador. Qabbani, whose talks with us have often been characterized by vicious attacks on USG policy, was calm and earnest on this occasion, as well as somewhat preoccupied. "I have been following your efforts to help get Lebanon out of this uncommon crisis," he began. "This is the most extreme crisis in Lebanon's history; more difficult than the period of the Taif Agreement." He praised Taif as having realized the dreams of Lebanese for peace and order, and said that there are currently "trenches" in front of a solution to the present crisis. Those obstacles are the opposition's insistence on a "blocking third" of the cabinet, and its behind-the-scenes decision to reject the international tribunal. On the tribunal, "we" (by which Qabbani presumably meant either the March 14 side or Lebanese Sunnis) can

compromise, but the opposition wants to remove the court's "foundation."

13. (C) The Ambassador noted that the establishment of the tribunal is a USG policy goal. We reject the idea that the tribunal will lead to civil war, he added, and take the opposite view: that a failure to establish it could contribute to civil war. Chamber of Deputies Speaker Nabih Berri has told us the opposition's reservations are minor; if so, why does he keep them secret? An article in the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Rai (purporting that the opposition would seek to boost the number of Lebanese judges on the tribunal) could be the basis for approaching the Speaker and asking him to share the opposition's reservations and demonstrate that they are minor.

14. (C) Other USG goals, the Ambassador continued, are a cessation of arms smuggling from Syria and Iran to Lebanon, which puts Lebanon in increased danger and constitutes a violation of UN SCR 1701; and to ensure that presidential elections are held on time and free of foreign interference. The failure of the Chamber to open its first session on time is also a matter of concern for us and the rest of the international community, especially because the Chamber is the place where many of the other issues need to be discussed. Finally, the makeup of an enlarged cabinet is a matter for the Lebanese to decide. We are mainly concerned that such a new cabinet not adversely affect the establishment of the tribunal or the implementation of any of the Security Council Resolutions the USG has sponsored.

SYMPTOMS VS. DISEASE

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15. (C) Qabbani said that in the Lebanese context, it is not enough to treat the symptoms; one must treat the disease also. In exploring this analogy, it became clear that he considered Shia resurgence in the Middle East to be the "disease." Politicians in Lebanon are using the current political crisis to realize their goals without being open with the public on what those goals actually are. The secret goal of Shia leaders is the overthrow of the Taif Agreement. The "disease" first appeared in the 1980's and was cured by Taif. Iran, in the person of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, opposed Taif, however, and recommended that Lebanese Shia reject it, because Iran sought expansion into Lebanon. (Note: Another explanation for Iran's rejection of Taif might have been that Iran and its Lebanese clients Hizballah and Amal were shut out of the diplomatic process leading up to the Agreement. End Note.) Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah (who was then Hizballah's

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representative in Iran) also went public with his rejection of Taif, Qabbani claimed.

16. (C) The overthrow of Taif and changing the governmental system of Lebanon are long-range goals of Iran and of Shia leaders in Lebanon, Qabbani claimed. Their chance came when talks started around the tribunal and a national unity cabinet. Hizballah is the head of the opposition and has no doubt been behind the formulation of the opposition's demands. But having the government conclude a deal with Hizballah over the tribunal and a national unity cabinet would be pointless, because Hizballah seeks to overthrow the government. Its threat of civil disobedience is just a negotiating tactic (and is not much of a threat as long as only government workers walk out, he added).

17. (C) So far, the opposition has claimed a commitment to the constitutional and democratic process in its public statements. A reasonable person is unafraid of democracy and constitutionality. Hizballah accepts democracy as long as such an acceptance gives it influence. It does not want

participation in the government; it is seeking control and the spread of its influence throughout the country's territory and institutions. In fact, what is happening here is but a part of a larger movement, in which Shia leaders are seeking to change the regimes (or "systems" -- Qabbani's Arabic word could mean either) in all Arab countries. Iran, in turn, wants to dominate Mecca and the entire region.

HIZBALLAH SPREADING FEAR AND CHAOS

18. (C) Even a small group can spread fear and chaos throughout the country, Qabbani remarked. What does it mean for Nasrallah to claim to have 30,000 rockets? If the message was just for Israel, it doesn't make sense. One does not disclose one's strength to one's enemies. It is a message for Lebanon. When Nasrallah appears and stages demonstrations, the GOL deems that he is backed by a strong militia. If there were a Sunni militia, Qabbani would himself call for it to be disbanded rather than expect the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) to confront it. Yet Nasrallah sits proudly atop a militia; it is unacceptable for a religious leader to be a militia leader, he concluded. If a Sunni or Christian spiritual leader were a warlord, no one would accept that.

19. (C) When Mustaqbal Party leader Saad Hariri entered elections in 2005, the Ambassador noted, we were concerned about his alliance with Hizballah. He told us he was trying to bring Hizballah into the Lebanese context. Prime Minister Siniora made the same argument when he brought Hizballah into the cabinet in July of that year, he noted, and realized it was a mistake when Hizballah turned against him (over the tribunal issue, in December 2005). Michel Aoun made the same mistake in February 2006 by concluding the Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah. Is there any distinction between Iranian and Syrian influence over Hizballah and its interests as a Lebanese party?

110. (C) The Mufti answered that "Hizballah's head is in Iran." Egyptian President Mubarak was aware of this when he said of the Shia that their allegiance is to Tehran. Before 1975 the Shia were "normal" like everyone else, Qabbani

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lamented, and they had some "wonderful" Parliamentarians. Then the Amal Movement and Moussa Sadr began a bid to control the Shia. The Iranian Sadr became the most revered Shia leader in Lebanon. (Despite this, Qabbani had to struggle to remember the name of the Shia "Sayyed," who disappeared and was presumed murdered by the Libyan government in 1978.)

111. (C) But how should Lebanon deal with the Shia parties, the Ambassador asked. They are now the most powerful in Lebanon. They have kept the president in place, crippled the parliament, and cast the pall of illegitimacy over the cabinet. At the same time they play the politics of victimhood, drawing on their traditional appeal to sympathy and grievance. Qabbani fingered Syria for these developments. Syria supplied them with weapons, he said, without which the Shia would have no role. (Note: It is interesting that Michel Aoun has made the same argument in favor of Hizballah's retention of its weapons; that it requires them to balance the financial and diplomatic clout of the other parties in Lebanon. End Note.) Syria did the same for the "Ahbash" Sunni militia, the Mufti noted by way of example. "For 30 years we could not send an imam to their mosques."

112. (C) Hizballah is different in one important way, commented the Ambassador: it has popular support. Even disarmed it would still command the support of the Shia. Qabbani argued that if Lebanon were disarmed it would be a normal country, though this would be a long and difficult goal to achieve. It is Amal and Hizballah's preparedness to kill or die that makes them influential. The Ambassador

noted that while Hizballah's actions have increased Sunni-Shia tension, that tension has also acted like a brake on Hizballah in turn. Qabbani agreed, noting that Iranian strategy in Lebanon cannot afford a Sunni-Shia clash.

SUNNI EXTREMISM

¶13. (C) Syrian purposes are different, though, added the Mufti, implying that Damascus has more than one partner in Lebanon. For example, he denounced Fatah al-Islam, recently implicated in the bombing of a commuter bus in Ain Alaq, as a front for a group bankrolled by Syria. Damascus funds it, he alleged, so that it can claim carte blanche to fight it. The Ambassador asked whether he is concerned about Sunni extremism, and he answered that while he and his religious establishment categorically reject all forms of extremism (he referred to Osama Bin Laden as "crazy") there may be foreign jihadis and others who "make mistakes" in interpreting Islam. If they have "weak thinking" they might join the side of "gangsters" like those who perpetrated violence during demonstrations on January 23 and 25. Intelligence groups are here supporting Sunni extremist groups, he alleged, without giving further details. Hizballah links Sunni groups to al-Qaeda to justify Hizballah's actions.

TRIBUNAL

¶14. (C) The Ambassador asked whether Hizballah is opposing the tribunal out of fear for itself or for some other reason. Qabbani noted that Rafiq Hariri's assassination is considered (by many) to be a crime against humanity. In that vein, Russia is playing a duplicitous role and secretly pushing Lebanon to reject the tribunal. The Shia ministers did not walk out of the cabinet because they were not given enough time to consider the tribunal before its cabinet session, which is their explanation. A reasonable person would have attended the session and then sought to delay a vote, he suggested. Instead, they have resolutely refused to talk about the basics or details of the tribunal.

THE 70 Percent SOLUTION

¶15. (C) The opposition accuses March 14 of possessing an "illusory" majority, Qabbani said, but "that is a lie." March 14 has 70 percent of the popular support of the country, and if there were a new election its share of the parliament would increase. The problem with the opposition, he added, is that in Lebanon no one can accept a situation

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like the UK Parliament's split between Conservatives and Labour or the two-party system in the United States. Neutrality and consensus are much more highly prized. For that reason, Lebanon's next president should be seen as a neutral figure. He should be someone capable of containing the opposition but also with the mentality of March 14. With its 70 percent popular support and majority parliamentary share, March 14 could elect that president.

TWO SUGGESTIONS FOR THE USG

¶16. (C) Qabbani closed our meeting by leaving us with two suggestions. What is happening in Lebanon is linked to what is happening in Iraq, Qabbani said. He acknowledged that both the USG and Iraq have a clear interest in a stable Iraq in a cooperative relationship with the United States and with its neighbors. What Iraq needs is an agreement like Taif. The partners would be all of Iraq's peoples: Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds. (Note: Qabbani did not mention any other minorities. End Note.) A conference to divide political and economic power among them and "give them their rights" should be held in either Riyadh or Cairo. Nowhere else is suitable,

he added when pressed, not even Baghdad; an agreement forged in an occupied capital would not retain credibility.

¶17. (C) Meanwhile, multinational forces in Iraq should not withdraw, but should embark immediately on a determined campaign to disarm all parties in Iraq. When the Ambassador asked what should be done about Iranian influence in Iraq, Qabbani answered that the Arab countries have to make Iran understand that its actions in Iraq will have consequences. Iran should have some say in Iraq, but not a true role. It has to understand it cannot cross its borders.

¶18. (C) Qabbani's second suggestion was that the USG should work to end the Israeli occupation of the Shebaa Farms. Syria had just publicly refused to accept the UN's work on redrawing the Farms' borders (a project which could confirm the Lebanese territoriality of the Farms) as long as the Farms are under occupation. For many reasons, an Israeli withdrawal from the Farms would help matters in Lebanon. (Note: Qabbani was presumably referring to Hizballah's use of the Farms' occupation as a pretext to retain its arsenal. End Note.) The Ambassador asked whether Hizballah would not invent other pretexts to keep its weapons. Qabbani admitted that there might always be pretexts, even "for a thousand years."
FELTMAN